

**Changes in the General Health Status (GHS) and  
General Mental Health (GMH) Variables in the  
CAHPS® Medicare Satisfaction Surveys**

**Summary**

**Background and Purpose:** The *CAHPS® Medicare Satisfaction Surveys* ask respondents to rate their own health status at the end of each survey. Among the health status items are questions asking respondents to rate their general health status (GHS) and general mental health (GMH). Research on the health status of Medicare beneficiaries has consistently found that those enrolled in Medicare managed care (MMC) are healthier than those enrolled in traditional fee-for-service Medicare (FFS). CAHPS data were collected from beneficiaries in both FFS and MMC for the first time in 2000, making it possible to verify this finding with CAHPS data. An analysis of the 2000 CAHPS data showed, as expected, that enrollees in MMC rated their health as being better than those in FFS Medicare. However, the 2001 data seemed to suggest otherwise, with FFS beneficiaries rating their GHS and GMH as being better on average than MMC enrollees. In our efforts to identify the reasons for this discrepancy, we found slight differences between the MMC and FFS surveys with regard to the wording of the GHS variable. Also, placement of the questions differed in the 2001 surveys. Thus, in the subject study, we performed various statistical analyses of these survey results to examine: 1) whether the differences in wording and placement may have influenced the way beneficiaries rated their GHS and GMH in the 2000 and 2001 FFS and MMC surveys; and 2) whether those differences inhibit our ability to make meaningful comparisons of the GHS and GMS data obtained from those surveys.

**Results:** Statistical analyses of the GHS and GMH ratings, in relation to beneficiary responses to other physical and mental health questions in the surveys, yield the following conclusions:

1. Differences in GHS and GMH ratings observed between FFS beneficiaries in 2000 and 2001 are due to differences between the surveys.
  - Specifically, we believe that placement of the GMH variable immediately before the GHS variable in the 2001 FFS questionnaire influenced respondents by biasing ratings of their general health upward.
    - After giving their mental status positive ratings, respondents may have rated their general health more favorably.
  - The increase in GMH ratings we observed in the 2001 FFS data, relative to the 2000 data, may also be due to the fact that the GMH

question no longer follows other questions about mental health and emotional issues, as it did in 2000.

2. Data from the GHS and GMH questions on the 2001 FFS CAHPS survey are not comparable to the 2000 FFS survey or the MMC surveys.
3. Researchers who wish to examine differences in physical and mental health status across years or between MMC and FFS probably should not rely solely on the GHS and GMH variables for their analyses.
4. Efforts should be made to revise future CAHPS surveys so that the wording and placement of health status questions are comparable.